

This review is published in *American Indian Culture and Research Review* 39 (2015): no.

1

THE MIXTECS OF OAXACA: ANCIENT TIMES TO THE PRESENT. By Ronald Spores and Andrew K. Balkansky. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press (Vol. 267 in the Civilization of American Indian Series), 2013. 328 pages.

This historical anthropology of the Mixteca in Oaxaca, Mexico ,and its associated people, the Mixtecs, surveys the major developments in this region and for these people from the earliest appearance of settlements around 2000 B.C.E. until the present time. In this effort the authors use what they call a “convergent approach,” an integration of archaeology, linguistics, ethnology, and documentary ethnohistory. Each author has conducted numerous archaeological excavations in the area and Spores has done extensive documentary research on the Mixtecs.

The Mixteca comprises the western 1/3 of the state of Oaxaca, parts of southern Puebla and western Guerrero. It is traditionally divided into three subareas: the Mixteca Alta, the Mixteca Baja, and the Mixteca Costa. It may be further subdivide, using linguistic data, into 5 areas with the Mixteca Alta and the Mixtec Baja each having two subgroups. The Mixtec language belongs to the Oto-Manguean stock of Mesoamerican languages which include Zapotec, also in the state of Oaxaca, and Otomi located in central and northeast Mexico.

Spores and Balkansky deal with each of these subregions. However the Mixteca Alta receives the most attention since this is the core area of Mixtec development that has been the most populous since prehispanic times. The Mixteca Alta is a mountainous region with small broken uneven valleys whose settlements range in altitude from 600 to 2000 meters. Agriculture formed the basis of Mixtec civilization as it did in other areas of Mesoamerica . To accommodate the rough topography of the region, the Mixtecs developed a system of terracing known as *oo-yoo* which may be unique among Mesoamerican groups. The Mixteca Alta is known primarily as an important regional component of Mesoamerican civilization in the postclassic period (ca. 900 B.C.E-1500 C.E.)and produced a pictorial writing system that details the history of the various Mixtec kingdoms. In fact, the greatest number of pre-Columbian books or codices survive from this region and its people producing a native written record of dynasties and “kings” rivaled only by the ancient Maya. This topic is treated in some detail although it is a small part of the total work.

The book contains eight chapters and is divided into two sections, the first section “The Mixtecs in Ancient Times,; includes four chapters on prehispanic Mixtec civilization. The second section,”The Mixtecs in Spanish Colonial and Modern Times,” has two chapters on the Spanish Colonial Mixteca, one on the 19th century, and one on modern times.

The authors consider many topics ranging from language history, conquest, environment and geography, land use, royal succession, markets, government al

structure, and religion throughout the long historical development of the Mixtecs. However, in my opinion, the highlights of the book include the following::

1. The Mixteca had a formative or preclassic period beginning perhaps as early as 1500 B.C.E. and by the Middle Formative it was one of the demographic core regions of Mesoamerica along with others as in the Valley of Oaxaca and the Valley of Mexico. The Mixtec people probably inhabited what is now called the Mixteca by this time.
2. There is no evidence that Olmec civilization was the influence for this pre-classic development so it must be assumed it probably developed independently.
3. Urbanization had an autochthonous development in the Classic period (ca. 300-900 C.E.). Therefore, the Mixteca was not a backwater of Zapotec Monte Alban civilization as has often been thought. Mixtec cities such as Yucuita, Yucunudahui and Monte Negro developed a distinctive dispersed urban pattern when independent "kingdoms" developed. There was no Mixtec "empire" or centralized state like Monte Alban in the Valley of Oaxaca even though they may have shared a writing system with the Zapotecs.
4. Because of the archaeological work by Spores and Balkansky we now know much more about Mixtec architecture of which there had been few examples. One of the features of the book is an artist's reconstruction of ancient Yucundaa-Teposcolula.
5. The Postclassic in the Mixteca continued this pattern of independent kingdoms such as Teozacoalco, Tilantongo, Teposcolula, Jaltepec, Acatlan, Tututepec, and

Yanhuitlan, among others, that forged alliances between themselves and with communities in the Zapotec Valley of Oaxaca. The Mixteca also developed its own unique writing system which influenced other writing systems in Mesoamerica such as that of the Nahuatl speaking peoples in central Mexico.

6. The Mixtec kingdoms called yuhuituyu or cacicazcos survived the Spanish conquest and continued even into the 19th century, albeit in modified form. Mixtec caciques (and cacas) made status and property claims well into the period of Mexico's independence from Spain.
7. The Mixteca survives until today as a viable area and its people maintain a marked regional identity. Because of the poverty in the area in recent times (although it had a thriving cochineal industry in the colonial period), Mixtecs have migrated to many other areas including the US and have become involved in "economic globalization" (p225). The authors see this modern development as somewhat unique even though there has been a long existing pattern of Mixtec diaspora.

From a theoretical perspective, there are 3 levels of anthropological discourse: one detailing how a people, group, village, etc. are unlike all other peoples; two, how a people are like many others.(middle range theory); and three, how a specific people are like all other people or like humanity as a whole (meta-theory).

This work addresses the first category almost exclusively-- how the Mixtecs are unique. There is some material dealing with the second level but as might be expected, almost none with the third. Perhaps because of the senior authors'

exclusive lifetime preoccupation with the Mixtecs, they are presented as exceptions to most generalizations, a perspective associated with Boasian historical particularism or historicism.

Further, matters regarding the conceptualization of states, cities, urbanism, stratification, class, peasants, community and ethnicity, among others, are often cursorily dismissed. Dogmatic assertions too often replace careful analytical concepts or comparisons. In other words, a weakness of the book is that it fails to place the Mixtecs and the Mixteca in an adequate cross cultural perspective either within Mesoamerica or elsewhere. Theory in the work either remains implicit or is totally non-existent.

There are also some gaps in specific information that are difficult to explain. For example, Mitla in the Valley of Oaxaca, a town that had significant prehispanic ties with the Mixteca even though the exact nature of that relationship is unclear, is hardly mentioned. There is a photograph of well-known Oaxacan archaeologist John Paddock examining the Mixteca-Puebla style wall paintings at Mitla. Mitla is mentioned in a list of places related to the prehispanic Mixtec diaspora but not until p. 228 toward the end of the book. There is no mention of its significance however.

Another matter, probably not the fault of the authors, is the dark quality of many of the photographs which not only make them less attractive but also make them of less value. The index, like those in many recent books, is very incomplete and items are often not found on designated pages of the text. For example, there is no mention of Mitla on page 22 as the index indicates. The bibliography is adequate but necessarily

highly selective. Fortunately their biases are noted in the preface and introductory materials and will be clear to those familiar with the literature on the area.

Nevertheless, the book is impressive especially in its use of historical documents. The archives in Mexico and Spain have been thoroughly exploited, and the chapters on the late prehispanic states, the colonial period, and the colonial caciques are its strongest features. The book also does much to clarify specific issues dealing with the relationship between colonial and prehispanic settlements within the Oaxaca region. Examples are Cuilapan, Teposcolula, and Yanhuitlan. Meticulous research shows that characteristics often thought to have been prehispanic in origin were actually colonial. The authors document colonial interactions between Spaniards and Mixtecs in great detail.

Given its thorough documentation, and the longtime association of the senior author with this region (Spores has spent well over 50 years of dedicated, persistent engagement in Mixtec archaeology and ethnohistory), this book is a must for all scholars working in Mesoamerica, Oaxaca, and the Mixteca; it will be of interest to serious readers of Native American and Latin American studies as well. There is no other book of comparable scope or time depth on the topic. *THE MIXTECS* is destined to become a “classic” in the field as are Spores’ two earlier books on the Mixtecs also published by the University of Oklahoma Press.

Joseph W. Whitecotton

Professor Emeritus of Anthropology

University of Oklahoma